DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 189 598 CS 205 667

AUTHOR Shohet, Richard M.
TITLE Public Relations: A Position Paper.
PUB DATE Oct 79
NOTE 8p.: Paper presented at the Annual Fall Conference of the New England Association of Teachers of English (Portsmouth, NH, October 19-21, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role: English Departments: *English Instruction: *Language Arts: *Public Opinion: *Public Relations: Public Support: *School Support: Secondary Education: Teacher Education: Teacher Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

Since public education must compete for public dollars with a range of other services, teachers must learn to present a good image and to create an environment in which their objectives and procedures are immediately obvious to parents, students, and school board members. A high priority for English department chairpersons, therefore, is to teach, train, and support teachers in their public relations roles. One specific method chairpersons can use to keep others informed is to insist that teachers require students to write the terms of the assignment at the top of each paper to make students' parents aware of the assignments and to remind teachers how they communicated the assignment to their students. Chairpersons can also instruct teachers to involve parents and other citizens in such student work as oral history assignments: discussions of books, articles, movies, or television shows; or analyses of regional or ethnic dialect characteristics. (MKM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED189598

Public Relations: A Position Paper

This paper is distilled from an address presented to a session of the New England Association of Teachers of English at their fall convention in October, 1979, at Wentworth-by-the-Sea, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Richard M. Shohet
Head of Secondary English
Lexington Public Schools
Lexington, Massachusetts 02173

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Richard M. Shohet

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS205667

Most of the time most teachers happily and perhaps a bit self-righteously claim that their students are "the bottom line. After-all," they say, "they're why we're here." Despite the obvious truth in that assertion, it is misleading, for the assertion represents only part of the truth. Now, more than ever in public education, classroom teachers are learning that their clientele includes more than students. Teachers are at least as answerable to parents, administrators, school boards, and taxpayers in general as they are to their immediate charges, the students. Teachers who have gained so much political and economic sophistication cannot remain naive about the exigencies of the marketplace, or about the marketing, so to say, of their own products. Put plainly, public education must compete for public dollars with a range of other goods and services. To enter and succeed in that competition classroom teachers must practice, if not become expert in, public relations. Realistically, administrators and school boards cannot be wholly entrusted with the tasks of interpreting and "selling" educational--classroom--practices and procedures to the public that supports or does not support them. Classroom teachers are both more competent and more convincing in carrying out that responsibility than any "middlemen," for only teachers can daily <u>prove</u> the programs that others can only profess.

More than interpreting, explaining, or justifying classroom practices or departmental programs to the public, English administrators must teach, train, and support teachers in their necessary roles in public relations. Whatever English department chairs can accomplish as "middlemen," classroom teachers can accomplish more better and quicker. Rather than the typical situation of parent complaining to department chair consulting with teacher getting back to parent, round and round, we can together create an environment in which the teacher's objectives and procedures are immediately obvious to parents, students, school board members, or whomever, accurately and consistently. In such an environment what teachers are doing and why they are doing it is communicated directly to the school's clientele the first time around. Whatever dialogue may ensue, then, is responsive rather than reactive, productive rather than argumentative. Debates between parents and teachers, for example, can focus on substance and form instead of on implication and inference: issues can be discussed.

How do English department chairs help teachers become proficient at public relations? What do they have to know? What do teachers have to know? To what extent do they have to modify or change the ways in which they prepare for their classes? What, really, are public relations as that term pertains to English classroom practices and procedures? Let's begin with the last question and, lest I be accused

of theory-spinning, let me cite specifics. I see copy--tests, quizzes, assignments--go home with typos, misspellings, crossings-out, and simply incorrect information: facts, not interpretations or readings. I see papers scored holistically with no explanation of that procedure. I see papers read and graded selectively with no mention of the selected criteria. And, I see papers with abundant critical commentary but no suggestions for improvement. These specimens, I submit, are both typical and counterproductive. They obfuscate our intentions and confuse and even anger our sponsors. Albeit unfairly, they question our competence. They becloud our best efforts. They are unnecessary. These examples of poor or non-existent public relations are less important because they occurred and do occur widely in the profession than because they did not have to occur at all.

I insist that all candidates for teaching positions and even all student-teaching candidates submit a brief sample of their own prose. I am not sure that one must write well in order to teach writing well, but I am sure that I do not want sloppy work done by teachers to be seen by anyone. I require teachers to require students to clearly, if succinctly, put the assignment on the assignment. That is, a quiz or test or paper must include somewhere in the heading the terms of the assignment: for example, "Five sentence paragraph including topic sentence and three pieces of evidence"; "Exercise on substituting phrases or clauses for adjective or adverb modifiers"; "Comparison of Charlotte's and Wilbur's

personalities graded holistically rather than analytically." Preceding or accompanying the last should be a brief explanation which both students and parents can understand of holistically scoring, indicating its comparative advantages and disadvantages over analytical correcting. If an assignment is executed in class under time and space constraints that fact should be noted. If a teacher does not include a comprehensive comment on an assignment, the reason should be noted. If the teacher has no reason, then I would expect a comment. So would the student, and anyone else who saw the paper.

In addition to the public relations aspect, requiring students to write assignments on assignments helps them to focus on the task (as well as helping the teacher to focus on the assigned task while correcting it.) That kind of explicit exegesis or revelation of the process of education makes such good pedagogical sense, it should occur irrespective of its public relations value. However, neither teachers nor their supervisors can afford to neglect the public relations potential. For one thing, the age of accountability is here. The closed classroom door is a thing of the past. For another, teachers are far more public servants than they appear to realize. Teachers who are parents of school-age children know this, for at their dinner tables the anatomy of that day's classes is carefully dissected. I hear so much about my children's teachers I often think that I could evaluate them as thoroughly as those teachers I observe conventionally. Parents certainly feel little

reluctance to recite to me, chapter and verse, what goes on in their children's classrooms, their own lack of first-hand observation notwithstanding. We cannot pack the hall on Back-to-School Night. We--teachers and administrators--do not always have opportunities to explain, to clarify, to justify. But teachers have countless opportunities to present themselves, their objectives, and their procedures to their publics.

What might happen if the so-called English requirement, be it de facto or de jure, disappeared from our school districts? Have English teachers fairly and accurately represented their efforts and their products sufficiently for English to compete with other subjects and activities in students' and parents' minds? What might happen to the need for English teachers in a wholly elective situation? Frankly, I suspect that many of our positions would be in jeopardy. I am not talking about SAT scores or improvement on reading tests. I am not talking about general public sentiment that probably supports instruction in the society's native tongue. I am not talking about our obvious significant accomplishments in increasing students' proficiency in their native tongue or in a second or third language. I am talking about the packaging of our product.

Packaging need not equal misrepresenting. In the case of public relations in and out of the English classroom, I am talking about fairly, adequately, and accurately representing. So many times it is only after explaining and interpreting that we make our intentions clear to our clientele,

one can only wonder how much more effective we would be if we stated outright--right there on the assignment--what we and our students were about. Supervisors have the clear advantage of being there: we can see first-hand our teachers' plans becoming practices. But even we, there at the event, are often inspired to exclaim, smack in the middle of a lesson, "Oh! That's what you were trying to do. That's what you are trying to accomplish." That's what the students are doing."

For the English teacher, public relations is simply ascertaining that our immediate and secondary constituents at virtually all times know what we are trying to do and what they are expected to do. (There are many interesting and creative ways to involve parents and even other citizens in students' work, e.g., oral history assignments; discussing a book, article, movie, or television show; analyzing regional or ethnic dialect characteristics.) Sadly and obviously, many of our students, their parents, and taxpayers in general do not seem to care much about these matters. But that is not the issue. The issue is simply to encourage teachers to "go public": to de-mystify the mechinations of the English classroom and curriculum, to render the implicit explicit, to in effect preclude any opportunities for students or their parents to remain ignorant of the objectives, methods, desired outcomes, or evaluations of a particular assignment or of the comprehensive English program. Such encouragement, along with whatever training and monitoring may be necessary, must become a high priority in the eighties for English department chairs.